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Historymakers is using video narratives to capture stories of African-Americans

Videotapes preserving 'unsung' oral histories

By Sabrina L. Miller
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Haki Madhubuti's eyes well with tears as he remembers his mother's murder. He remembers finding her, and he remembers that the first suit he ever wore was at her funeral.

Madhubuti remembers how her death was the catalyst for him, then a Detroit teenager named Don Luther Lee, *becoming* Haki Madhubuti: a prolific poet, author and educator, and the head of a thriving South Side publishing house.

Madhubuti is recalling this deeply personal story in front of cameras, preserving it on videotape as part of The Historymakers, a groundbreaking, Chicago-based archival project that chronicles the history of successful and "unsung" African-Americans through first-person video narratives.

Black History Month, which begins Thursday, celebrates many of the same themes the project embraces. The initiative combines the best of an old Afri-

can-American tradition—the passing of oral history from one generation to the next—with current technology that includes video archiving and an interactive Web site (www.the-historymakers.com) featuring streams of completed interviews.

The goal, said founder Julieanna Richardson, is to create a digital archive that will be available to museums, libraries and historians.

"History is a patchwork of individual stories," Richardson said. "With video you can see a person's eyes, you can see how they laugh, you can see what makes them emotional. It's a valuable tool for us.

"As black people," she continued, "there's so much of our history that needs to be preserved before it's too late."

The project, headquartered in a South Loop office and studio, draws natural comparisons to film director Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual



Photo for the Tribune by Gino Domenico

Dance pioneer Katherine Dunham, a native of East St. Louis, is one of the people The Historymakers recently interviewed.

History

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History Foundation, which, in its six-year history, has videotaped more than 50,000 first-person narratives of Holocaust survivors. Richardson hopes to complete 5,000 interviews in the next five years.

Spielberg created Survivors of Shoah after the release of his Academy Award-winning film "Schindler's List" to capture first-person accounts of aging Holocaust survivors worldwide. Though Richardson's project is smaller in scope, she has gained support from other video archivists, who agree that an African-American themed archival project is the best evolution in documenting history that might otherwise be lost.

"One hundred years from now when history is written, it won't be on pieces of paper, it will be on video," said Douglas Greenberg, president and CEO of Survivors of Shoah. Greenberg is the former chief executive at the Chicago Historical Society.

"This medium is especially powerful in communities where the oral tradition is so strong," he said.

Madhubuti also praised the project, which Richardson began about a year ago when she was at a crossroads in her career as a video production specialist.

"What Julieanna Richardson is doing is in keeping with the very

best of our culture," Madhubuti said. "It will serve generations of children as they try to negotiate their way through a very difficult world."

The project lacks the powerhouse financial backing of a Spielberg, but it has received wide support from African-American notables, including Harry Belafonte, who headlined The Historymakers national launch in November.

Before a packed house at the Rubloff Auditorium at the Art Institute of Chicago, Belafonte was interviewed by actor Danny Glover. For more than 2½ hours, Belafonte kept the audience riveted with details of his long career on stage, in film and as a civil rights activist. An edited version of the Belafonte interview is scheduled to air later this month on PBS and on cable's A&E channel. Richardson, 46, a Harvard-trained lawyer, wears many hats as part of the project, and fundraiser is foremost among them.

One of the largest financial benefactors of The Historymakers has been the Illinois legislature, which gave a \$200,000 grant last year. Some of that funding is earmarked for a side project documenting the histories of African-American lawmakers in Illinois.

The initiative also has received grants from private foundations. Richardson estimates yearly costs for the project at about \$1 million.

"You know, Harry Belafonte told me this was put together with sticks and glue," Richardson said. "I didn't know how to take that at first, but I guess it's true."

The heart of the operation is in the interviews where subjects thus far range from Chicago notables like ETA Creative Arts Foundation founder Abena Joan Brown to national figures like former Washington, D.C. Mayor Marion Barry, who reveals little-known facts of an otherwise infamous public life, like that he once chopped cotton for \$3 a day to support his family in rural Itta Bena, Miss. When Richardson gets into controversial territory about the infamous 1990 narcotics arrest that led to jail time and a failure to seek another mayoral term, Barry keeps a stiff, uneasy grin on his face, chews ice and rubs his brow. He said of his troubles: "That was just a blip on the radar screen. One little incident out of a thousand."

Richardson is hoping for equally revealing interviews with forthcoming subjects like photographer and filmmaker Gordon Parks, figure skating Olympian Debi Thomas and singer Lena Horne. Interviews recently were completed with Black Enterprise publisher Earl Graves and dance pioneer Katherine Dunham, a native of East St. Louis.

Ultimately the project represents hope for future generations, participants said.

"The Historymakers puts before us that there are a whole lot of African-American people who have done a whole lot of historic things," said Brown. "It highlights that there are a lot of John Q. and Suzy Q. Publics that are responsible for making significant contributions to our history."